

Space and Sculpture in the Classic Maya City

In this book, Alexander Parmington combines an examination of space, access control, and sculptural themes and placement to propose how images and texts controlled movement in Classic Maya cities. Using Palenque as a case study, this book analyzes specific building groups and corresponding sculptures to provide insight into the hierarchical distribution and use of ritual and administrative space in temple and palace architecture. Identifying which spaces were the most accessible and therefore more public and which spaces were more segregated and consequently more private, Dr. Alexander Parmington demonstrates how sculptural, iconographic, and hieroglyphic content varies considerably when found in public/common or private/elite space. Drawing on specific examples from the Classic Maya and other early civilizations, he demonstrates that, by examining the intent in the distribution of architecture and art, the variation and function of the artistic themes represented in sculpture and other monumental works of art can be better understood.

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Summary

Spatial analysis of specific building types, combined with the thematic inquiry of corresponding sculpture, has proven to be a helpful method in gaining more developed insights into the hierarchical distribution and use of ritual and administrative “space” in Classic Maya (A.D. 250–900) city centres. Evidence suggests that monumental art, its subject matter, and its placement were exploited by the Maya elite as instruments of communication and control at important Maya sites. Drawing on specific examples from Palenque, in this study I demonstrate how “access analysis” of building group “archetypes” (Andrews 1975) can be used to detect shifts in the thematic content of monumental art, subject to differences in accessibility. I argue that sculpture and other artistic media assigned to distinct types of spaces (differentiated by progressive enclosure, channeled movement, and changes in elevation) may, like the spaces themselves, be sorted from most “public” to most “private,” and the scenes, activities, and symbolism represented can be characterised similarly. Underpinning my investigation is the premise that “public space” and “private space” correspond to notions of “common space” and “elite space” and, furthermore, that monumental art contained within common and elite categories of space was accessed by corresponding common and elite audiences.

The presence of divergent sculptural themes at varying levels of accessibility in both the Cross Group and the early phases of the Palace at Palenque indicates that different types of imagery were directed at different audiences at Palenque. Although the Palace Group investigation detected some correspondence between spatial context and differences in the themes represented at the earlier stages of its development, analysis of subsequent phases implies that the importance of sculptural embellishment gradually diminished over time. The declining significance of sculpture and other decoration in the Palenque Palace is signaled by the relatively minor artistic contributions at later phases and by changes in the accessibility of artwork that existed prior to the structural modifications undertaken by later rulers.

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